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# Decommissioned places: Ruins, endurance and care at the end of the first nuclear age

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This paper argues for a geography of deindustrialising places as spaces of inhabitation and endurance, rather than one based on narratives of progres, decline and ruination. Ruins have long been a concern for geographers, yet the material remains of modernity's grand schemes feed easily into ways of seeing and knowing deindustrialised spaces that can efface the practices through which lives and worlds are made in the present. Drawing on fieldwork in the former Soviet *atomgrad* of Visaginas, Lithuania, the paper both acknowledges and pulls back from the draw of the ruin. Moving away from the ruin-temporalities of progress and decline, it offers an account of ongoing practices and modes of habitation in spaces defined by ruination. A reflexive acknowledgement of our contaminated role in making sense of such spaces allows us to be both enchanted by grand narratives of hubris and decline and to see other stories – stories of living on, of endurance, and of making lives in places circumscribed as futureless by political and economic regimes. As such, the paper offers an alternative geography of places that are decommissioned from above, paying attention to the care, commitment, makeshift practices and aesthetic projects through which their inhabitants live on. Engaging this approach through a series of small stories based on ethnographic and collaborative fieldwork alongside two photographers in Visaginas, I posit that the material and subjective remains of the dreams of the first nuclear age give rise to emergent forms of life that stand in excess to narratives of progress and decline. The ruins of Soviet nuclear modernity here operate as containers for practices of endurance and living on through changing relations of power and capital, rather than objects of melancholic loss, and as raw materials through which to forge ways of living in spaces characterised as surplus to requirement.

**KEYWORDS**
endurance, Lithuania, nuclear decommissioning, photography, post-industrial, ruins

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Ignalina nuclear power plant, and its satellite town of Sniečkus (now Visaginas), took shape on forested land at the edge of a lake. The town was utopian in its ambition for an ideal, spatialised articulation of

socialist life, and was built by its own residents, who were posted there to construct the town and plant, and eventually to work in the plant. When Lithuania applied for accession into the European Union in 2004, a condition of its membership was the decommissioning of the Ignalina plant. A sacrificial lamb to European citizenship, the town's residents lost their livelihoods, identities, and the motherlode of their community in exchange for the economic advantages of the free movement of labour in the European Union. The endgame for the decommissioning of Ignalina is to return it to a "Green Meadow," by dismantling the plant and its reactors, constructing underground waste repositories and rewilding the site.[1] Lying in the middle of the forest, with no alternative economic plan for the town and its Russian-speaking inhabitants, it lives on as a waste product of the ephemerality of modernity's grand schemes and of the first nuclear age, its human inhabitants seen as relics of another time and another world. Decommissioning began in 2009 and will continue there for the next 30 years. Since the announcement of the plant's closure, the town has lost a third of its population and many buildings lie empty, in disrepair, or unfinished.

Geographers are no strangers to the melancholic pleasures of modern ruins, whether through performative acts of historical reconstruction (Brigstocke, 2016; DeSilvey, 2007; MacDonald, 2014), summoning up spectral presences (Edensor, 2005; Hill, 2013), or reflecting on sublime landscapes of postindustrial ruination (Swanton, 2012). Indeed, a rich seam of work on ruination runs through Geography and its cognate disciplines that both rejoices in and critiques their semiotic and affective power, providing fertile ground for introspective fantasies of self-destruction, finitude, and melancholic loss. The scopic lens of the ruin, as a specifically modern mode of seeing and engaging, lurks throughout geographies of deindustrialised and abandoned spaces. Reproducing colonial and spectatorial fantasies of detached observation, it gazes on the violences of Anthropocenic life and modernity's fall, while perpetuating modernist temporalities of progress and decline.

While fantasies of ruination are not treated unproblematically in these geographies of decay, they tend to engage with ruins as uninhabited. Recent work in Anthropology has produced a shift in perspective towards inhabiting rather than looking at ruins, and invites the telling of different stories from the overarching progress narratives and melancholic tales that ruins often invoke. In particular, Anna Tsing argues that the ruins of late capitalism offer potential for scholarly explorations of emergent forms of life: alliances, inter-species collaborations, and makeshift forms of thriving (Tsing, 2015). These moves are echoed in postcolonial critiques of the ruin, including those of Gaston Gordillo and Ann Laura Stoler, whose work exposes the forms of colonial violence effaced through the lens of the ruin and points to the relations of ruination to postcolonial capital and neoliberal state projects (Gordillo, 2014; Stoler, 2013). Here, ruins are rethought as spaces of inhabitation, inviting a post-modern, post-humanist, post-apocalyptic temporality that acknowledges collaborative survival and crisis management in the present to live with the chaos of the future (Wakefield, 2018; Wakefield & Braun, 2019). This eschatological move is also echoed in the work of Berlant and Povinelli, who theorise the modes of experience through which populations laid to waste by biopolitical forms of power endure and live on, and for whom progress narratives are either cruelly taunting or simply unavailable (Berlant, 2011; Povinelli, 2011).

By bringing these anthropological ruin-dwellers to bear on the spectral and affective approach to the ruin characterising much cultural geography, and drawing on collaborative fieldwork in Visaginas with two photographers, this paper addresses the problem of researching – and representing visually – places in decline. It brings to visibility the doubling of our relation to these lenses of ruination: of being enchanted then pulling away, as we oscillate between *looking at* and *dwelling in*. This reflexive acknowledgement of our contaminated role in making sense of such spaces allows us to be enchanted by grand narratives of hubris and decline and also to see other stories – the stories of living on, of endurance, of making lives in futureless times.[2] Described by one participant as "both the most interesting and the most boring place in the world," Visaginas is at once a spectacular site to explore the nuclear Anthropocene and a locale within which the mundanity of small-town life makes itself felt.

As this paper will show, the material and subjective traces of Visaginas' nuclear and Soviet past not only haunt the present, but enable emergent forms of worlding, for example through mutual aid and support, practices of care and non-capitalist forms of work and exchange. The ruins of Soviet nuclear modernity and their ongoing transformation and erasure here operate as containers for practices of living on, with, and through industrial decline. Moreover, the specificities of this place and its history – the spatial egalitarianism of the town, the role of the state and local administration, and the practices of duty and care of its human inhabitants – enable forms of creativity and livelihood to emerge that make lives liveable. In this context, it is precisely *through* the remains of Soviet materialities and subjectivities that a form of care in and for the present and for the proximate is nurtured.

## 2 | THE MAKING OF A TOWN

Sniečkus was built on forested land from the late 1970s onwards. The town was to be built in the shape of a butterfly, with main arterial roads cutting between the "wings" and through the "body," although the rapid halting of the build at the time

of the collapse of the Soviet Union has meant that only three of the four "wings" of the butterfly were completed. The town's campus design keeps traffic to a minimum, and apartments, play spaces and community spaces are connected via sandy paths through the forest (Figure 1).

Visaginas lies two hours' drive from Vilnius and 6 km from the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant. It is one of many planned socialist towns built throughout the Soviet Union. These were mainly mono-industrial towns, built around nuclear power, coal, and steel (Cinis et al., 2008). Founded in 1973, the Ignalina nuclear plant was to be the largest in the Soviet Union and designed to meet the growing energy needs of the region. It began operating in 1983. The building of Sniečkus was ordered by the Committee on Atomic Energy of the USSR, and was designed by the celebrated Soviet architects Akulin and Belyi, who had already worked on other atomic cities, including Sosnovyi Bor and Shevchenko.

Such towns served two purposes: to house workers for large-scale industrial operations and to spatially showcase Soviet planning and the good life that it was possible to achieve through socialist economics, particularly in the farthest reaches of the Soviet Union. As such, they were both projects of social engineering and means of spatially articulating and fostering socialist subjectivities (Cinis et al., 2008). As planning scholar Jack C. Fisher discusses, the Soviet planner was mobilised by the desire to "express tangibly in the brick and mortar of his cities the philosophical aspirations of Marxism-Leninism" (Fisher, 1962, p. 252) through a standardisation in size and quality of living space and housing density, provision of infrastructures and service utilities such as schools and kindergartens in neighbourhoods, and functionally similar neighbourhood spaces. Unlike its impoverished siblings in other peripheral provinces, the town benefited from a direct supply line to Moscow. The function of the town as a showcase for socialism was clear: at the entrance to Visaginas one encountered the

**FIGURE 1** Paths running through the town. Photograph: Griffiths and Tacon.

slogan: "Not everyone is allowed to live so generously: to build the town for the memory of people" (Balockaite, 2012, p. 47). With the ready availability of fresh food, well-planned living spaces, amenities and services, short housing waiting lists, and clean forest air, by and large the residents of Sniečkus lived a good life.[3] During its peak, those living in Sniečkus were the golden children of the Soviet dream. The residents of Sniečkus had little contact with the rest of Lithuania, and Russian was – and remains – the *lingua franca*.

During the town's burgeoning, workers were posted from other parts of the Soviet Union. Nuclear engineers and physicists came from the closed cities in the north and east of Russia. Like pioneers, they camped by the lake and took part in the construction of the town as they waited for an apartment. They moved with their families, and, because couples often met during their training or education, schools in particular had highly qualified personnel working there. It was known to be a town of and for educated people: a technical and maths school prepared students for work at the plant (Šliavaitė, 2015).

With its forests and lakes, mild climate, and higher dwelling standards, the town was seen as something of a "socialist paradise" (Cinis et al., 2008). Sniečkus had the advantage of being semi-open, meaning that people could come and go more freely. Electricity was free, courtesy of the plant, and hot water for the town was provided by the huge pipes that link the town to the plant. What nuclear scholar Gabrielle Hecht (2012) refers to as the "nuclearity" of the town was expressed materially throughout: a display indicates levels of radiation as well as the ambient temperature in a square in the middle of the town, children's play structures are shaped like subatomic particles, the iconic ventilation stacks of the plant are visible for miles and the ubiquitous pipes that brought water from the cooling process into the town run alongside and sometimes over roads (Figure 2). Referring to these pipes, one resident told us how "they used our bodies to cool the reactors." People brought up in the town remember the sirens, the drills, and the exercises they undertook in preparation for the worst. Workers spent summers barbecuing and relaxing at the plant's training centre in the woods just outside the town. There was an intertwining of bodies, town and plant, a form of nuclear urbanism that celebrated the peaceful atom through the idea of the *atomgrad* (Brown, 2013; Wendland, 2015).

When the Soviet Union began to collapse, work on the building of the town and the planned third and fourth reactors ceased. When the plant's closure was announced in 1999, the population of Visaginas fell dramatically, from 29,554 in 2001 to 22,091 in 2011 (Šliavaitė, 2015). This period was described by interviewees in terms of a collective trauma: one participant described the experience of the closure of the plant as "losing a mother." Others recounted the distress involved in taking apart something that you worked to build; others the transition from chosen few to unwanted settler, as Lithuania gained independence from the Soviet Union and Visaginas' Russian-speaking residents experienced ethnic tension and hostility. Many left straight away for the opportunities of London, Berlin, and Amsterdam. Others remained, trying to make sense of their redefined status.

The decommissioning of the Soviet-built RBMK-1500 reactors of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) continues today, while negotiations regarding the possibility of building a new reactor as part of an integrated Baltic power infrastructure falter and fail. For years, the town faced uncertainty about the possibility of new reactors being built there – this is unlikely now. Old-style reactors are gradually being taken out of operation, the spectres of Chernobyl and Fukushima never far away. Promises of investment into industries that capitalise on local skills and expertise failed to materialise: the city was seen by the Lithuanian state as a shameful relic of the Soviet past and its nuclear legacy (Balockaite, 2012). Many apartments now lie empty or unfinished. While infrastructure is maintained, the town has been left to fade quietly, with no clear regeneration game plan, large-scale unemployment, and little maintenance of buildings since Soviet times. The town, alongside the plant, has effectively been decommissioned. Since the plant's closure, Visaginas has undergone a process of historical erasure and forgetting in official discourses, first in terms of its nuclear heritage and second with regard to its association with the Soviet regime (Balockaite, 2012). This spatial reframing by the local authority – a reimagining of the town as a city of youth, sports, and nature – sits uneasily with the pro-Soviet and pro-nuclear sentiments of many of its inhabitants.[4] To many who live in Visaginas, this feels like abandonment.

## 3 | BEING CONTAMINATED

The research discussed in this paper forms part of a collaborative project with photographers Laurie Griffiths and Jonty Tacon, and the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre. The collaboration engaged reflexively with the scopic modes through which places in decline are represented, and explored alternative modes of representation that are sensitive to the ongoingness of such places. As such, it builds on an emergent thread of work in cultural geography that attempts to move beyond the clichés of "ruin-gazing" (for example, see DeSilvey, 2017; Gallagher, 2015; Lorimer & Murray, 2015). In combining cultural geographic approaches with ethnographic fieldwork, narrative interviews, and participatory theatre workshops, and in contradistinction to the above work, it encounters Visaginas as a lived and populated space, caught up in ongoing

**FIGURE 2** The pipes linking town and plant. Photograph: Griffiths and Tacon.

political and economic relations of postindustrial and postsocialist transition. The project explored the relationship between the inhabitants of Visaginas and the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, their responses to structural change, and the forms of living through which they endured what they saw as futureless times (Lear, 2006). It led to photographic exhibitions in London and Vilnius, and an accompanying photographic book, *Babochka*. The Lithuanian National Drama Theatre's *Green Meadow* was a documentary theatre production involving non-professional actors from Visaginas that dramatised the stories and experiences of the closing of the nuclear plant, and toured Lithuania in 2017.[5] On our three field visits to the town and the plant, I conducted 18 narrative interviews with current residents of Visaginas, including first generation migrants who built the town, their children and grandchildren, and more recent migrants from other parts of Lithuania. I also accompanied theatre participants through their workshop processes and worked alongside Griffiths and Tacon.

I was initially drawn to the project after meeting with Griffiths and Tacon, who recounted the story of the town's rise and fall. Intrigued, I collaborated with them on their photographic project and wrote essays for their exhibition catalogue. During our forays in the town, we became aware of the extent to which our own understandings of the town's story were inflected through the scopic regime of the ruin, and through narratives of progress and decline.[6] So entrained were we in these ways of seeing, so enamoured with the delights of Soviet brutalism – the weeds shooting up through the cracks in poured concrete and the graffiti on half-finished apartment blocks – that we bought wholeheartedly into those narratives of ruin-gazing so beloved of the students of the picturesque and the flâneurs of the Benjaminian city.

We checked ourselves. In interrogating these narratives, we gained a deeper purchase on both what enchanted us – and others – about the place, and the powerful political work that such cultural narratives do in occluding other stories. This paper emerges from the seductive grip of progress and ruin narratives, our reflexive engagement with this grip, and our

acknowledgement of our own contaminated histories.[7] The photographs, all by Griffiths and Tacon, bring richness and depth to the arguments herein, and at the same time illustrate our oscillation in and out of regimes of the spectacular and the mundane.

## 4 | THE PROBLEM WITH RUINS

From the early articulations of *ruinenlust* in the Renaissance, through the picturesque landscapes of Gilpin, through Walter Benjamin's wanderings in the recent ruins of the Paris Arcades, to Sebald's melancholic peregrinations along England's East Coast, there is an uneasy pleasure in ruin-gazing (Benjamin, 1999; Dillon, 2014; Macaulay et al., 1967). As critic Brian Dillon makes clear, the ruin is variously "a reminder of the universal reality of collapse and rot; a warning from the past about the destiny of our own or any other civilisation; an idea of beauty that is alluring exactly because of its flaws and failures; the symbol of a certain melancholic or meandering state of mind; an image of equilibrium between nature and culture … A desolate playground" (2014, p. 5). For Benjamin, the ruin is an allegory for the creative destruction of capitalism, and for the temporalities that inform capitalist modernity by evoking the dual operation of progress and decline. As such, "overcoming the concept 'progress' and overcoming the concept of 'period of decline' are two sides of one and the same thing" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 460).

In cultural geography, the ruin becomes material archive, and the Modern's fascination with decay and fallen hubris finds its articulation in sensitive and evocative reconstructions of past lives and the telling of "small stories" (Lorimer, 2003). Fraser Macdonald's storying of an abandoned house on the Hebridean island of Vallay and its erstwhile occupant, Caitlin deSilvey's careful study of material fragments and ephemera in the remains of a Montana homestead, as well as her more recent work on the curation of decay, and Tim Edensor's evoking of past lives and labour through his wanderings through the deindustrialised spaces of the United Kingdom all explore the archival potentials of the dilapidated built environment (DeSilvey, 2007, 2017; Edensor, 2005; MacDonald, 2014). In these cases, the geographer is both haunted by and in active process of recovery of the past through ongoing engagement with materials in decay, in some cases allowing matter to "speak back" (Lorimer & Murray, 2015, p. 58). Ruins are read as spaces of melancholy, as spectral landscapes through which absences can be re-presenced as imagined/remembered pasts are folded into present experience (Hill, 2013). As DeSilvey and Edensor (2013) discuss, the recent resurgence of interest in ruined, abandoned, and declining spaces in geography and cognate disciplines needs to be read in the context of this fascination with the spectral and with decay, and they rightly caution against the evocation of the ruin.

The aesthetics of postindustrial sites in particular feed into well-rehearsed imaginaries of the political left, such as the melancholic loss of industrialised labour and the figure of the proletarian worker (Edensor, 2005; Strangleman, 2013). In this geographical line of exploration, it is spectrality, matter, and memory that is the object of investigation in spaces devoid of contemporary human occupation.

Elsewhere in the social sciences, this concern with postindustrial sites has focused on the psychological, social, and material effects of deindustrialisation on communities (Mah, 2012; Storm, 2014; Walkerdine & Jimenez, 2012). Yet despite these nuanced accounts of the effects of deindustrialisation, research on such places in decline tend to focus on their relationships with the past, rather than on the practices of the present through which such spaces are made and remade, and through which their inhabitants endure processes of ruination.[8] In other words, while there is rich and varied work on deindustrialising places, in human geography and its cognate disciplines, their temporalities tend to focus on the past as defining feature of the present, placing the end of history at the moment of deindustrialisation. This leaves us at a temporal impasse where we are no longer capable of imagining a future outside of the Benjaminian binary of progress and decline, where futures become "exhausted" (Brigstocke, 2016). Citing Patrick Keillor, deSilvey and Edensor suggest that, as "we no longer have the power or energy to imagine a better world, we now poeticise dilapidation" (DeSilvey & Edensor, 2013).

Cultural imaginaries of ruination can efface present lives and labour, positioning those that dwell in such spaces firmly in relation to the past and as living in futureless times. The ruin-gazer reads space through material decline, delighting in creative destruction and architectural decay. When figured through the lenses of "ruin porn" and urban exploration, the inhabitants of such spaces are ignored and erased, exoticised as spectacles of the ravages of modernity, or incorporated into racialised imaginaries that undermine indigenous claims to and accounts of place (Safransky, 2014). Discussing representations of Detroit's postindustrial landscapes, Millington argues that imaginative geographies of picturesque decay and longing for a Fordist past are "gestures of compassion that nevertheless write urban residents out of the frame, and place Detroit in a mythic past rather than a vivid present" (Millington, 2013, pp. 279–280). Similarly, Dawdy discusses the dystopian fantasies that pervade representations of modern ruins, arguing that these ways of seeing "allows their inhabitants to be written

off as mutants and specters … by indulging in such spectatorial fantasies, we at best other and dehumanise, and at worst eradicate, the inhabitants of decaying urban spaces" (2010, p. 776).

To figure deindustrialised spaces thus is essentially a performative gesture, as Johannes Fabian and more recently Elisabeth Povinelli make clear (Fabian, 1983; Povinelli, 2011). Fabian's seminal anthropological text, *Time and the other*, argues that the emergence of Anthropology, particularly through its reliance on social evolutionism on which it initially gained its disciplinary authority, is characterised by what he calls a "denial of coevalness" – "a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse," which, in turn, affects how both colonial and postcolonial forms of power have related to the objects of anthropological enquiry (Fabian, 1983, p. 31; Said, 1978). Drawing on this work, Povinelli (2011) discusses how biopolitical discursive regimes use linguistic tense in order to render populations anachronistic, finite, and therefore worthy of letting die. Povinelli argues that, through the use of tense, late liberal discourse narrates the lives of its others as sacrificial objects, whose exteriority to dominant modes of temporality justifies forms of biopolitical modes of letting die. Moreover, these temporal figurations "distract the eye from potential social worlds … [and from] understanding these spaces as lived worlds" (Povinelli, 2011, pp. 29–30), feeding into the ongoing production of futurelessness in spaces of abandonment. We struggle to find hopeful politics and perhaps even collude in this making-finite when we embrace such tropes. In their drive to call forth the past and their focus on the aesthetic, modernist narratives of progress and decline can efface decommissioned places as sites of endurance: as sites of living on, in, and through ruination. These lenses are far from neutral.

Places such as Visaginas prove seductive ground for researchers drawn to the guilty pleasures of the ruin. Visaginas is no stranger to artists, academics, and flâneurs wanting to experience the broken dreams of modernity at first hand: its modernist apartment blocks, poured concrete, and nuclear aesthetic call out to a certain form of western spectatorialism. Indeed, it is one of those "overresearched places" through its evocation of those the ruin-clichés of technological sublime, urban decay, the crumbling of the Soviet hubristic dream. There is certainly an aesthetic fixation with Soviet-era ruins in the West: a fascination with the traces of past glories, grand narratives, and atomic dreams (e.g., Hatherley, 2015). Nuclear landscapes such as Visaginas easily feed into atompunk fantasies, and rehearse the narratives of ruination that proliferate among them, offering the sublime enchantment of large-scale infrastructure (Harvey & Knox, 2015) and a meditation on Faustian hubris (Berman, 1983).

On arriving in Visaginas, we too, were seduced by its crumbling concrete, half-finished buildings and the majesty of its aspiration and nuclearity. Walking through the cultural centre, we meet our first informant. Immediately marked as "ruin tourists" by our semiotics of hipster urbanity – retro clothing, glasses, groomed beards, and camera equipment – he enquires as to whether we would like to see some "cool abandoned buildings." He offers to show us a building called "Suicide," where kids go and hang out and drink. Other research participants resist this view of the town: on seeing prints from our first field visit, Sasha commented on the ruin-gaze framing some of the photographs, and suggested that we were making the town look uncared for. The material fragments of Visaginas, told through such progress narratives, might be seen in terms of a sorry tale of abandonment and decay, of ruination and destruction of lives and hopes and dreams. And of course, if we look for these stories we can often find them (Figure 3).

Spending time in Visaginas forced us to both confront and step away from these narratives, as comparisons of work from our subsequent field visits testify. Our photographic, dramaturgical, and ethnographic lenses began, over the course of our visits here, to move away from images and stories of ruination, and towards the small stories (Lorimer, 2003) and creative collaborations (Dwyer & Davies, 2009) that provide counter-knowledges and new geographies of decommissioned places. We focused on the spectacular and the mundane as sites where the past lives on in the present, but also on how worlds are made through that living on, paying attention instead to what grows up in the cracks. The photographic shift from images of declining infrastructure to intimate portraits accompanied the shift in our ethnographic focus away from stories of loss and decline and towards practices of the present.

If places in decline *invite* such spectatorial responses from western voyeurs and academics alike, providing the Benjaminian confirmation of the ruination of capital that the metropolitan critic hungers for, they have also afforded different responses from an emergent field of enquiry that has interrupted such distancing gazes, pushing for a critique that lives in and through frayed and ruined worlds. To decline this invitation, or to enter into it through a reflexive mode of engagement, is to refuse the progress–decline dyad of modernity and to cohabit spaces of endurance and living on. Recent anthropological and critical work has provided a rich literature engaging with spaces of ruination on these terms, offering perspectives that not only acknowledge the colonial gaze implicit in them, but also arguing for the ruin as a site of inhabitation, for the burgeoning of emergent forms of life and as a mode of comprehending ways of living in and through planetary modes of violence. Indeed, it is in that apogee of ruin-porn, Detroit, that urban geographers and political ecologists have paid attention to the political effects of ruin-gazing, refocusing their lens on the city as lived place and engaging its


**FIGURE 3** "Suicide." Photograph: Griffiths and Tacon.

inhabitants as interlocutors rather than spectacle (Fraser, 2018; Safransky, 2014, 2017). In doing so, they value ruins as spatial articulations of habitation and abandonment amid ongoing economic and political processes, and highlight the political work that ruin temporalities do in supporting capital accumulation and green gentrification.

In *The mushroom at the end of the world*, Anna Tsing (2015) argues that the overarching stories that get told about such places are stories of progress and decay: stories of abandonment, resource depletion, deforestation, and of industrial decline and communities left to waste. But, she suggests, "if we end the story with decay, we abandon all hope – or turn our attention to other sites of promise and ruin, promise and ruin" (Tsing, 2015, p. 18). Tsing encourages us to look beyond these narratives, and to consider what else can emerge, like mushrooms, in such spaces. Mono-industrial places like Visaginas produce the "dream of alienation," the transformation of people and things into mobile assets, which can be abandoned when the asset runs out, leaving ruins, as their inevitable afterlife, saturating the late capitalist world (Tsing, 2015, p. 5). Tsing's call is to consider the ruin not only in terms of that which has gone before, but as a fertile breeding ground for emergent and entangled forms of life. In her multi-species ethnography tracing the material and economic entanglements of humans and Matsukake mushrooms in the ruined landscapes of former plantations, she argues that the mushroom's "willingness to emerge in blasted landscapes allows us to explore the ruin that has become our collective home" (Tsing, 2015, p. 3), even as she acknowledges how these emergent social relations are always part of capitalist development and neoliberal projects.

Ann Stoler discusses how ruins can shed light on how imperial violence impacts on worlds, seeking to "track the uneven temporal sedimentations in which imperial formations leave their mark," and looking at "how empire's ruins contour and carve through the psychic and material space in which people live and what compounded layers of imperial debris

do to them" (2013, p. 2). Similarly, in his ethnography of colonial and capitalist processes in the foothills of the Andes, anthropologist Gaston Gordillo writes of being "forced to think against the assumptions about ruins and decay that dominate the present" (2014, p. 24). His concept of "rubble," as a postcolonial rereading of the ruin, implores us to reconsider such sites as spaces of living on through "ruptured multiplicity," and rubble as a practical resource for inhabitation (2014, p. 2). Such literatures point, for example, to practices of urban mining and street play as forms of salvage existence (Chelcea, 2015; Wallsten et al., 2013). Mired as they are in an awareness of the forms of violence inflicted on a damaged earth, these texts identify a sense of being what Braun and Wakefield describes "already living in a *post-apocalyptic* condition" (Braun and Wakefield, 2014) (authors' emphasis). In situating the study of ruins within regimes of structural and slow forms of planetary violence, these literatures escape the linear progress/ruination temporalities of the Modern's obsession with the ruin, instead engaging material fragments and processes through their use-value and through the fractured temporalities and destructive histories to which they refer. Their post-apocalyptic rather than dystopian gaze – an eschatological temporalising of ruined spaces, enables an escape from progress temporalities and operates in a splintered and overlapping end-time.

A second set of literatures, drawn from critical theory, attempts to elucidate the experiential modes of being that are produced through the biopolitical conditions of late capitalism and partition certain populations as abject and redundant. They point to ways of coping and living with the conditions of late capitalism that are at once deadening, unsettling, enervating, and anxious. To this end, thinkers such as Lauren Berlant and Elisabeth Povinelli have reframed the critical study of everyday life away from problems of resistance and practices of freedom, and towards persistence, and the forms of dissociation, atmosphere and attachment that give shape to the everyday struggle of maintaining a life in conditions of exhaustion. Berlant calls these contemporary pathologies of late liberal flux the "crisis ordinary" (2011, p. 10), arguing that structural transformations taking place over the late 20th and early 21st centuries have begun to tug at the stories that hold us together, stories of family intimacy, job security and social mobility, leading to the emergence of what she calls a "precarious public sphere, an intimate public of subjects who circulate scenarios of economic and intimate contingency and trade paradigms for how best to live on, considering" (2011, p. 17).

Where Berlant points to the forms of cruel optimism and attachment through which we cling on to what is left of our frayed worlds, Povinelli provides a means of thinking about the forms of living and social projects that can emerge in zones of abandonment, asking, "how do new forms of social life endure the effort it takes to strive to persevere?" (p. 9) Her interest is in the forms of "suffering and dying, enduring and expiring that are ordinary, chronic, and cruddy, rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden and sublime" (2011, p. 132), those ways of living that are able to endure in some form, within processes of active state abandonment that refuses to let them become something more.

These thinkers advocate a form of attention to what stands before us – a call to stay with the trouble (Haraway, 2016), working in and through the problem of the present, and pointing to the (often problematic) ways in which broken worlds are lived in and through. In response to these challenges, rather than poeticising dilapidation, we need to feel the draw of the ruin, then check ourselves and stay open to these spaces as sites of living on through the troubled present, and of establishing new ways of being-in-relation, bearing witness to what exceeds the ongoingness of apocalyptic life (Ginn, 2015). In other words, rather than abstracting post-industrial spaces from time, we need to understand how such spaces emerge through specific moments in late modernity, and are shaped through ongoing political and economic processes. As Abdumaliq Simone suggests, "in these ruins, something else besides decay might be happening" (2004, p. 407).

A series of small stories from our collaborative fieldwork in Visaginas now follows. These stories hint at lives rendered liveable after the fall of the grand projects of modernity: the modes of creative and collaborative survival through which those who have remained in (or returned to) Visaginas are living. Enriching and giving life to the stories in the text are photographic portraits taken by Griffiths and Tacon. Following on from these brief textual and photographic portraits are some observations about the material and subjective remains of the Soviet nuclear dream, and its persistence in the context of competing visions for the town, including those of local entrepreneurs, government officials, and those responsible for the decommissioning process. These show how such remains enable practices of living on in the present, providing the foundations for emergent forms of collectivity and collaboration. The "rubble" of Visaginas' past is incorporated into practices of remembering and reusing that operate alongside, and against, its definition as futureless, and official attempts to erase its history.

## 5 | SMALL STORIES

In a former nightclub in Visaginas, I get talking to Gyorgy and Ivan, who were given the space rent-free by the local authority, with six friends, to use as design studios. We go up the marble stairs, past crumbling plaster walls and into a

large, concrete space separated off with boxes and crates. There is a portable sound system in the corner. Art installations are dotted around the space. We hang out, drinking beer and playing table tennis, and Gyorgy and Ivan talk to me about how special Visaginas is. "We are the last children of the Soviet Union," they joke. They invite us all back to spend the summer there, barbecuing and swimming in the lake. Sitting alongside these new friends, walking in the forest and resting by the lake, we see a very different Visaginas from the tales we'd heard and from what we'd chosen to look for on our first visit to the town. We begin to notice the forms of collective life that emerge in the absence of direction from above, in the afterlife of progressive modernity.

Jelena shows me into her apartment. She is in her late fifties and lives alone. There is green tea on the table, biscuits, cakes, and coffee. Her friend from Moscow is visiting for the weekend and is looking to move to the town. On her balcony she is raising young tomato and courgette plants, which she will take down to her *datcha* later in the year. She, and others like her, enjoys informal modes of exchange of homegrown and homemade food through the *datcha*. Jelena was a system administrator for the plant until its closure. She and her husband (now deceased) worked at the plant as programmers, having moved to Sniečkus from an atomic naval base in 1983. She describes the complexity of their work, the high-pressure environment, the degree of alertness and skill needed. Wanting to maintain interest and keep participating in the life of the town, she runs a computer clinic and class, teaching IT to older people. Tablets, smartphones and laptops are donated by former Visaginas residents, and Jelena, with colleagues, fixes and reformats them and distributes them to people who have remained (Figure 4).

**FIGURE 4** Jelena. Photograph: Griffiths and Tacon.

We meet Maria at the cultural centre. She shows us around an art exhibition that she has been working on with friends from a painting group. She moved to Sniečkus in 1977, from Tomsk-7 (Seversk), a closed town in Siberia, and was one of the first settlers in the area, living in an encampment at the edge of the lake among moose and roe deer for the first few years. During this time, she recalls, people supported each other, offering baths, food, and mutual support: building the town was a collective endeavour in both life and work.

In another part of the cultural centre, Maria has curated a collection of Baltic and Soviet material culture. In the Slavic room, we are surrounded by dolls, wall hangings, weaving, tablecloths, religious artefacts, deer antlers, and egg cups. The Soviet room has a TV, some telephones, radios, and other ephemera. Maria poses for her portrait in front of the material she has collected. She tells us how tourists who visit the collection always ask whether its exhibits are for sale. Later, she shows us her archive of photographs of the town's construction, collected by her husband. In these photographs, the town takes shape from forest, marsh, and lakes, and families barbecue together in the woods. We walk into the studio adjoining the collections, where eight people are working on paintings at desks in convivial silence. Maria, as well as being an amateur archivist, runs art sessions for older members of the community (Figure 5).

Nikolaj and Tatjana met in Volvograd in the early 1980s. Together, they joined Komsomol (All-Union Leninist Young Communist League) and participated in a nationwide construction project. On arriving at Visaginas, their job was to help build the town from scratch, living in an old wagon by the lake. In between working, Nikolaj set up a rowing and canoeing school at the lake. During Perestroyka, all was "turned upside down." They opened a shop and a language school. Now they run a small hotel in the town that accommodates many of the European subcontractors who come to work on the

**FIGURE 5** Maria. Photograph: Griffiths and Tacon.

**FIGURE 6** Nikolai. Photograph: Griffiths and Tacon.

decommissioning. Nikolaj and I walk down the steps of his home and into a large subterranean garage. It's cold and sunny and the house is surrounded by trees. In the garage is a machine that looks like a cross between an exercise bike and a rowing machine. He tells me of his plan to create a human-powered motor, based on his biomechanical expertise, that uses all the major muscle groups in the human body to generate energy. In the evening, Nikolaj and Tatjana host a musical event, and we go along (Figure 6).

Alex meets us at the cultural centre, and invites us back to meet his wife and baby son. He is in his twenties, and walks barefoot, whatever the season. While they make pancakes for us, Alex shows us the dreamcatchers he makes from objects he finds in the forest, and the room in his apartment that acts as his workshop. He tells us about his projects with young people in the town: he works part-time at a youth centre, and when he is not working, he and his friends devise increasingly large and complex live-action role-playing games in the woods, organise collective runs through the town, and make artworks. In the time between our second and third visit, Alex had secured the use of a five-storey building in the central precinct of the town. Based on art-squats he had encountered in his travels around Europe, he has created an open space for young people to hang out and play board games, make music, and meet up. Various small enterprises run out of the building. Later on, he shows us a lake where people swim, and we walk over duckboards and boggy ground to sit at the edge, watching the reflection in the lake of the tips of the trees flaming orange with the setting sun.

Anastasia's parents are both engineers. Like most young people, she moved elsewhere in the European Union for a while, spending five years in the UK as a student and an au pair. We hang out in the one room that she lives in with her partner and their baby. Being in her early twenties, she grew up with the idea that she would have to leave Visaginas, yet, like a few of her friends, she moved back to work remotely for companies in the UK, and to start an eco-tourism and

wellbeing business with her partner. For her, Visaginas' affordability offers a short working week, and time with family and pursuing hobbies. Its proximity to forests and lakes are a major factor in remaining here.

These stories, of the banal and everyday lives lived in a small town, reveal that there is a lot more to towns like Visaginas than tales of progress and ruin. They draw attention to the practices of the present that make it possible to remain in places in decline, to endure change, and to make lives liveable. What is clear from these stories is a commitment to remain, to care for and support those who remain, and to make worlds, particularly through practices of making, growing, play, and care. Where the state has decommitted to this place, there is certainly willingness from its inhabitants to maintain and care for it. Yet if this is the case, then to what extent can we attribute these emergent forms of sociability to the specificities of the town itself? In other words, do material remnants themselves allow such forms to emerge, and if so, how?

One way in which Visaginas fosters sociability is in its spatial planning. Its equality of housing size, shared outside spaces, ready availability of play, sports, and recreation spaces, and easy interaction with the natural environment are often discussed. Many of those we spoke to celebrated the proximity of the forest and the availability of berries and mushrooms nearby. The town's open design and greenspace is a major reason why people choose to remain there, and those who do often rate this over economic ambition. Egalitarian housing (all apartment blocks) limits the pressure to compete for aspirational housing choices, and the combination of population density with urban greenspace and forests all around enable both sociability and open space.

On losing aspirational tenor, economic affluence, and the ready availability of models and possibilities of the good life that the structures of cruel optimism tie people into, Visaginas's economic position regulates futures away from these lures. Places in decline are cheap: in Visaginas, it is possible to buy an apartment for €8,000 and rents are low. Consumerism is minimal, and the town's isolation, through cultural and language differences, remoteness, and social and economic isolation, means that its inhabitants are less tied into those fantasies of the good life as consumption. Those old enough to have taken pensions from the plant on its closure maintain themselves through these. For younger generations, unemployment is high, and what work there is may be part-time, precarious, and poorly paid. Yet the lack of need for cars in a campus city, the lack of shops and restaurants, informal economic activities, and low property and land costs, as well as the disproportionately high number of engineers with practical skills mean that it is possible to live a decent life on a minimal income.

Immersion in the natural environment offered a strong reason for staying in Visaginas. Practices of foraging for berries and mushrooms, growing food and gardening in the *datcha*, swimming in the lake, and playing in the forest are key activities through which those who remain articulate their attachment to place. These practices position Visaginas as a place of natural abundance, of affording the sort of life and inhabitation with other species that would be harder to obtain elsewhere, and provides a counter narrative for its inhabitants to its perception by other Lithuanians as a toxic environment. As Maria points out: "When the plant was in operation, we did not fear the radiation, we were not afraid of anything. There was a feeling that it is cleaner and safer here, than in Moscow, where you need to travel an hour by train to gather mushrooms. Here you just go out, there is a lake in front of the house, hundred metres and you can swim, gather mushrooms, pick berries: how can you go away from this luxury?" She speaks of service, of responsibility to share knowledge and expertise. "I'm not interested in money, or financial stability." In the absence of economic abundance, the clean air, water, forests, wildlife, and gardens offer a plenitude of liveability to those in the town that they valued above other opportunities.

Visaginas has been described as "last Soviet bastion in Lithuania" (Balockaite, 2012, p. 72). Soviet citizenship and subjectivities has led to strongly felt commitments to duty, service, and to the motherland. The town, like others undergoing post-Soviet transitions, has seen a move from a secure but authoritarian existence, where the paralysis of choice was to some extent eradicated and existence was dependent on powerful collective ideology, through a series of macro-level changes that have had deep effects on citizenship, identity, economic and social life. The traces of the Soviet dream, shattered fragments of a totalising, paternalistic master narrative, live through the people and landscapes of Visaginas. The relatively closed community, and its status as Russian-speaking enclave, enables the continuation of Soviet forms of interaction and mutual support, for example through clubs, unions, and groups.

When I talk to those who still live there, they invoke again and again the idea of the motherland, articulated through practices of care for their surroundings; a feeling of responsibility towards something that is greater than the self. Yet in the absence of Moscow, of a united Soviet republic, the motherland mutates into something else. Mischa, a worker at the plant, notes how "In Russia, we are Lithuanians; in Lithuania, we are Russians; in Visaginas, we are Visaginas." This attachment to place is also tied to the part played by many of the town's residents – and their kin – in building the town, and this history of labour and commitment towards the project and dream that led to the emergence of a community and vast nuclear plant provides a powerful source of attachment to place. While we are walking back from a swim in the lake, Andrei shows me a photograph he has on his phone. It is of a poster of the town's emblem, featuring a stork and the "friendly atom," that was displayed in Soviet times. He tells me, "When I look at this I feel proud."

While the plant is decommissioned, the town, with its poured concrete apartment blocks, its forests, summerhouses, children, aspen and larch trees, embodies something around which and for which its residents coalesce and towards which they dedicate time, love, and energy: the motherland has wrenched apart from itself, fragmented and reformed into a solid, autochthonous foundation from which a people emerge. Only this time, there is no master plan, only small acts of world-making: gift-giving, teaching, making, being together. In other words, the forms of Soviet subjectivity as duty, service, and collective identity have provided those in Visaginas with the tools to make a particular form of present, a world that enables many to withstand the changes imposed on them. Maria discusses her desire to do as much as she can for the people who remain, of her need to leave a legacy to give something. She relates how "my generation talk first about a motherland, then about ourselves. It is our mode of operation."

In Tsing's ethnography, the mostly East Asian mushroom pickers lived outside of state regimes. Through self-employed mushroom picking, outdoor living, and avoidance of incorporation into regimes of governance, control, and exploitation by low-wage employers, and the gaze of state forestry workers, the pickers participate in a reconfiguration of living and working that, while very much part of cycles of capital accumulation, is experienced as a kind of freedom. In Visaginas, too, a reconfiguration of work and life is taking place, but is made possible by the state, through public employment, a basic minimum wage through the welfare system, through pensions associated with the plant closure and through a remittance economy made possible by the open borders of the European Union. In other words, those carving out a life in Visaginas' nuclear ruins do so *as a result of* state intervention and the neoliberal project of Europe; their lives are defined by ongoing histories of relationships with the state and with capital, whereas the mushroom pickers' lives are defined by its circumvention.

In Visaginas, a confluence of affordances constitute the conditions of possibility for affirmative forms of world-making that interrupt progress narratives: the affordability of housing, the lack of regulation of space, the landscape, the liveability of the campus town, the residual Soviet subjectivities, and the care for the motherland. Not only have these left its people to some extent resilient against the changes imposed on them, but also all are contributing factors in the forging of new (if restricted) ways of being in the ruins of modernity's grand schemes.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

This paper has argued for a mode of relating to places of abandonment and places in decline that considers them not as emblematic objects of the ravages of modernity, but as containers for emergent forms of inhabitation in a damaged world. The dominant modes through which Human Geography and its cognate disciplines address places in decline can play into modernist and colonial spectatorial regimes, and into temporalities of progress and decline. A focus on the materiality of the ruin can erase present inhabitants from view, while a lens tinted by loss and finitude performs a temporal Othering. Both elide the ongoingness of the present, the ways that the inhabitants of such spaces live on through cycles of creation and destruction.

Geographers working in decommissioned spaces need to be aware of the draw of the ruin, and of the hubristic dreams of modernity that attract them in the first place – often a hard but necessary truth to acknowledge – and also of the part that the remains of those dreams play in the ongoing life of these places. In doing so, we acknowledge our complicity in the production of such regimes, and of the politics of elision and disavowal that they serve. Only by looking outside of these ruin-temporalities can we actively decolonise the ruin-gazing trope that runs through cultural geographies. Taking its cue from thinkers concerned with the problem of the present, and from those offering counter-readings of ruined landscapes, the paper has made the case for a geography of spaces of abandonment and ruination that pays attention to the makeshift practices, aesthetic projects, and modes of care, devotion, and commitment that their inhabitants bring to places that are "decommissioned" from above.

Dreams of progress – and their necessary decline – obscure other stories that interrupt these tales. Those who live in Visaginas are making lives for themselves and each other in different ways. They grow fruit and vegetables in their *datchas*. These provide land for small-scale agriculture and for exchange of produce, decreasing reliance on capitalist economics and consumption. They move between the town and other parts of Europe. They sell handicrafts, exchange skills, look after the woods, and bring up children. In the town, worlds are being made and cared for, in the garages and workshops, in the playgrounds, in the neat piles of swept leaves, in the spotless corridors of the power plant, in the tying of a scarf. This is not the iconography of abandonment, of a people laid to waste. Rather, it concerns the material practices through which lives are made meaningful and liveable, and the ways in which those living in places defined through regimes of abandonment find ways to endure. Yet this is no redemptive tale: these "latent commons" (Tsing, 2015, p. 255) emerge from stubborn drives to persist and to retain form, in spite of ongoing processes that seek to redefine, erase, and let die.

Rather than making emblematic claims regarding places in decline, to read Visaginas thus is to pay heed to its specificities and autochthonous creativities. That these emergent forms coalesce into a form of politics, or new patterns of worldings, seems unlikely. It is the task of the critic, when residing in such spaces, to notice the micropolitics of liveability, and to spotlight and augment them; to activate their nascent creativities and practices of hope in the present, without falling into the well-known traps of romanticism and post-industrial pastoral; to recognise and live with the struggle of endurance, and "illuminate the cracks in the global political economy" (Tsing, 2015, p. 4). There is little chance of a new nuclear future for Visaginas – its residents have long since given up on the masters of infrastructure to whom they were once beholden to save them – and there seems to be no replacement for that Soviet energetic dream. But looking beyond those tales of progress, ruination, and decline enables us to make space for, to bring to visibility, the forms of living that burgeon in such ruins: those signs of life and of making a life that turn up in the cracked concrete of Visaginas' boulevards, in the derelict nightclubs, and in the fade-to-white of the end of the first nuclear age.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## ENDNOTES

[1] "Green Meadow" is the name given to the decommissioning process at Ignalina by the European Commission: to "return the site to nature" through demolition, waste internment, and replanting of indigenous species.

[2] See Haraway on contaminated practices (Haraway & Randolf, 1997).

[3] There were, however, differences in this quality of life between those who worked at the plant and those who didn't, often as a result of privileges such as canteen tokens given to nuclear workers and their families.

[4] Interviews with economic development organisations, local government officials, and local politicians stressed this emergent imaginary for the town, and can be compared to other interviewees' sadness as aspects of the town's nuclearity are removed and replaced.

[5] The photographs and accompanying essays from the *Babochka* project are available at https://www.griffithstacon.com/ (accessed August 2019).

[6] For discussion of the term "scopic regime," see Jay (1998).

[7] Stories are always partial, contested, and fractured. The storytelling here reads the accounts offered by participants through and against one another and diffracted through the lens of critical and cultural theory.

[8] A recent exception to these binary temporalities of modernity, and a useful counterposition to modern ruins, can be seen in recent geographical attention to the "ruins" produced by hypermobile and financialised capital. See, for example, Woodworth and Wallace (2017), Sorace and Hurst (2016) on "ghost cities" in China, and O'Callaghan et al. (2014) and Kitchin et al. (2014) on the symbolic meanings of "ghost estates" as collective response to the 2008 financial crash in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland.

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